

Robert Beers
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Women in American History T and TH
Marian Anderson Report
1-25-2011

Marian Anderson was born February 27, 1897, according to her Birth Certificate? Throughout her life she gave her birth date as February 17, 1902. She was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Marian Anderson was the oldest of three daughters born to John and Anna Anderson. John was a loader at the reading Terminal Market, and Anna was a teacher in Virginia. In 1912, John suffered a head wound at work and died not to long after. Anna and her three daughters moved in with John's parents, while Anna found work cleaning, doing laundry and scrubbing floors.

Marian attended William Penn High School, focusing on a commercial education so that she could get a job until her music vocation arose. She transferred to South Philadelphia High School, focusing on music and singing frequently at assemblies, and graduating at age 18. She applied for admission to a local music school, but was coldly rejected because of her color.

Her musical career began quite early, at the local Baptist church in which her father was active. She joined the junior choir at age six. Before long, she received the nicknamed "The Baby Contralto." When she was eight, her father bought a piano from his

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brother, and she taught herself how to play the piano because her family could not afford lessons.

When Marian was 13 years old, she joined the senior choir at church and that was when she began visiting other churches; becoming well-known and accepting invitations

to sing. She became so popular that she would sometimes perform at three different places in a single night. Finally she got the confidence to request five dollars per performance. In 1919, at the age of 22, she sang at the National Baptist Convention.

When she was 15 years old, she began voice lessons with Mary Saunders Patterson, a prominent black soprano. Shortly after, the Philadelphia Choral Society held a benefit concert, providing \$500 for her to study for two years with leading contralto Agnes Reifsnnyder. After she graduated from high school, her principal enabled her to meet Guiseppe Boghetti, a much sought-after teacher. When he heard Marian audition, singing "Deep River," he was moved to tears.

Marian's initial invitations to sing grew to actual tours, focusing on black colleges and churches in the South. William King

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accompanied her and also served as her manager. Soon she was making \$100 per concert. On April 23, 1924, they took a giant step and held a concert at New York's Town Hall. Unfortunately, it was poorly attended and critics found her voice lacking. Marian was so discouraged, she contemplated abandoning her career choice.

Shortly after, she won a singing contest through the Philadelphia Philharmonic Society and then, in 1925, she entered the Levisohn Stadium competition. She beat 300 rivals and sang in New York's Amphitheater with the Philharmonic Orchestra

accompanying her. This concert was a success and gained her the attention of Arthur Judson, an important impresario, who gave her a contract.

In 1926, Marian toured the eastern and southern states, adding songs to her list. On December 30, 1928, she performed a solo recital at Carnegie Hall. A New York Times critic wrote: "A true mezzo-soprano, she encompassed both ranges with full power, expressive feeling, dynamic contrast, and utmost delicacy." But despite this

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success, her engagements were stagnating; she was still performing mainly for black audiences.

Marian then obtained a scholarship through the National Association of Negro Musicians to study in Britain. On September 16, 1930, she performed at London's Wigmore Hall. She returned to the U.S. only to return to Europe again, on a scholarship from the Julius Rosenwald Fund. She was intent on perfecting her language skills (as most operas were written in Italian and German) and learning the art of lieder singing. At a entrance concert in Berlin, she attracted the attention of Rule Rasmussen and Helmer Enwall, managers who arranged a tour of Scandinavia. Enwall continued as her manager for other tours around Europe.

Marian returned to the U.S. to do more concerts then, in 1933, returned to Europe again through the Rosenwald Fund. From September 1933 through April 1934, she performed at 142 concerts in Scandinavia alone, even singing before King Gustav in

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Stockholm and King Christian in Copenhagen. She received a rare invitation to sing from Jean Sibelius, a 70-year-old famous Finnish composer. He was so moved, he dedicated his song "Solitude" to her, and saying, "The roof of my house is too low for your voice."

She followed those concerts with appearances throughout Europe. This tour concluded in 1935 with an international festival in Salzburg called the Mozarteum. Arturo Toscanini, a very important conductor, heard her sing and told her, "Yours is a voice such as one hears once in a hundred years." Another famous impresario, Sol Hurok, also heard her sing shortly after that and made a contract with her for American concerts.

On December 20, 1935, Marian appeared for the second time at New York's Town Hall. This time she was a great success. She also gave two concerts at Carnegie Hall, and then toured the states from coast to coast. She went on to tour Europe again, and even Latin America, through 1938 - performing about 70 times a year.

Throughout Marian's life, she had experienced racism, but the most famous event occurred in 1939. Hurok tried to rent Washington, D.C.'s Constitutional Hall, the city's

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foremost center, but was told no dates were available. Washington was segregated and even the hall had segregated seating. In 1935, the hall instated a new clause: "concert by white artists only." Hurok would have walked away with the response he'd received, but a rival manager asked about renting the hall for the same dates and was told they were open. The hall's director told Hurok the truth, even yelling before slamming down the phone, "No Negro will ever appear in this hall while I am manager."

The public was mad, famous musicians protested, and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt resigned from the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), who owned the hall. Roosevelt, along with Hurok and Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), encouraged Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes to arrange a free open-air concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial for Easter Sunday. On April 9, Marian sang before 75,000 people and millions of radio listeners. About her trepidation before the event, she said: "I said yes, but the yes did not come easily or quickly. I don't like a lot of show, and one could not tell in advance what direction the affair would take. I studied my conscience. As I

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thought further, I could see that my significance as an individual was small in this affair. I had become, whether I like it or not, a symbol, representing my people.” Several weeks later, Marian gave a private concert at the White House, where President Franklin D. Roosevelt was entertaining King George VI and Queen Elizabeth of Britain.

Marian performed at Constitution Hall In 1943, at a benefit for the Chinese relief. She insisted the DAR suspend its segregated seating policy for the concert. Later, she said, “I felt no different than I had in other halls. There was no sense of success. I felt that it was a beautiful concert hall, and I was happy to sing in it.”

Marian married Orpheus H. Fisher sometime in July 1943, a Delaware architect she had known since childhood. They lived on her “Marianna Farm” in Connecticut. During World War II and the Korean War, Marian entertained troops in hospitals and bases. By 1956, she had performed over a thousand times.

January 1955, Marian debuted at the New York Metropolitan Opera as Ulrica in Guiseppe Verdi’s “Un Ballo in Macherà” (The Masked Ball) – the first black singer as a regular company member.

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She was 58 years old and, feeling past her vocal prime, felt she overdid it out of nervousness. Later, in Philadelphia, she was satisfied with her performance.

She toured India and the Far East in 1957 as a goodwill ambassador through the U.S. State Department and the American National Theater and Academy. She traveled 35,000 miles in 12 weeks, giving 24 concerts. After that, President Dwight Eisenhower appointed her as a delegate to the United Nations Human Rights Committee. She sang at his inauguration, as well as John F. Kennedy's in 1961. In 1962, she toured Australia. In 1963, she sang at the March on Washington for Job and Freedom. Easter

Sunday April 19, 1965, Marian gave her final concert at Carnegie Hall, following a year-long farewell tour.

Orpheus passed away in 1986. So in July of 1992, Marian moved to Portland, Oregon, to live with her nephew, conductor James DePriest. The following spring, she suffered a stroke and was restricted to a wheelchair. On April 8, 1993, Marian Anderson died of

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heart failure, at the age of 96. In June, over 2,000 admirers attended a memorial service at Carnegie Hall.

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